

## SPECIAL EDUCATION RESEARCH IN EUROPE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The last half century has seen major changes in special education, arguably far more than in general education. Legislation, professional initiatives, lobbying by parent groups and changes in the concept of disability, allied to the spread of the idea of comprehensive schooling, have come together to transform the education on offer to large numbers of children and young people. Many who were once deemed ineducable are now offered schooling and have life opportunities that would have been dismissed as fanciful 50 years ago.

These changes have gone hand in hand with a growth in the academic study of special education, both stimulating and drawing from it. The field, such as it was, drew primarily on medicine and psychology at the outset. From the 70s onward there was a burgeoning of research that, moreover, saw special education as an *educational* and *societal* matter, as opposed to a medical or psychological one. Much of this took place in North America but, increasingly, European countries contributed to the research effort.

This paper offers an overview of research in special education conducted in Europe in recent years. It is based on an analysis of the articles published in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* over the ten years from January 1998 to December 2007. Thus, it covers Volumes 13 to 22, comprising 33 issues – three issues a year until 2004 and four issues a year from 2005 – and 215 articles. Three of these issues were special or part-special issues which dealt with a particular theme.

While the aim is to give an overview of the research conducted in Europe in that period, this cannot be exhaustive, for a number of reasons. First, it is based on research *published* rather than research *conducted*. The expectation is that most research of substance that has been carried out will be published but this is not necessarily the case always. There may well be studies which, for a number of reasons, have not been published or have not been published in conventional journal article format. Secondly, the *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, like other journals, is essentially reactive. With the exception of special issues or invited pieces – which are quite few – it can only publish what is submitted for publication. There are editorial guidelines which provide some direction to potential authors, but the articles which are published must necessarily be selected (on quality grounds) from the articles submitted.

Thirdly, there are other outlets for publishing articles based on research conducted within Europe. Some researchers seek publication in national journals such as the *British Journal of Special Education*, the *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *Tijdschrift voor Orthopedagogiek* or *Revista de Educacion*. Others target international journals such as the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, the *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* or North American journals such as those published by the Council for Exceptional Children. Yet others orient their writing to disability-specific journals, particularly in the fields of hearing and vision impairment.

Despite these limitations, the present exercise does have value as a measure of research activity in Europe. The *European Journal of Special Needs Education* has a unique role as a continent-wide journal that operates within a broad view of special education research, theoretically and methodologically. Its focus is European as distinct from national, on the one hand, or global, on the other.

It may be noted that the Journal has a small amount of material that appears to originate from outside Europe. In some cases this is because an author had conducted research in a European country but was working elsewhere by the time the article was published. In other cases, European colleagues co-authored papers with non-European colleagues. A few papers with no particular European reference have been accepted for publication because they were deemed to be relevant to special education in Europe.

## 2. RESEARCH TOPICS

An initial scrutiny of paper titles and keywords points to the predominance of inclusion or inclusive education as a topic for research. This is hardly surprising since the discourse of special education has moved to foreground inclusion in recent years. This is a positive development to the extent that it focuses attention on the regular school system and the changes necessary to ensure that all pupils receive a high quality education alongside peers in their local school. Many papers address these issues and are helping to build up a body of knowledge that improves the educational offering for all pupils, though as will be noted below there are some gaps in the areas of interest. An unfortunate characteristic of the emphasis on inclusion is that the term tends to be used in a catch-all way to signify any development or practice deemed desirable in special education, regardless of whether that development is most appropriately described in relation to inclusion or not.

The papers published in the Journal over the ten-year period cover a very wide range of topics. These have been grouped into the six most common topics (Table 1) and other topics with six or more papers (Table 2).

TABLE 1. MOST COMMON TOPICS

Topic	Number of papers
<i>Parents and families</i>	22
<i>Teacher attitudes</i>	20
<i>Policy</i>	20
<i>Social and emotional development</i>	17
<i>Early years provision</i>	13
<i>Language development</i>	13

### 2.1. Parents and the family

There were 22 papers on parents and the family, covering a wide set of topics. Most focussed on parents, especially mothers, with one each on grandparents and on siblings respectively. One paper was a think piece offering a definition of the family in the context of children with disabilities. The largest group of papers (5) reported on parents' views of different aspects of their children's schooling and service provision. Two papers reported on attitudes of parents who did not have a child with special educational needs toward inclusive practices. Maternal feelings and interactions, partnership

issues and home visiting accounted for several papers each. Other topics covered included parental choice of provision, maternal stress and the factors that predict it, training given to service providers in respect of working with parents, and media representations of parents' experience of ADHD.

While many of the studies reported were small scale and largely descriptive, some were important national studies drawing on large samples and utilising sophisticated data analysis procedures.

## **2.2. Teachers and teacher attitudes**

Teachers and teacher attitudes were the subject of 20 papers. These covered both special and mainstream schools, with a preponderance of mainstream samples. There has been a good deal of research into teachers' attitudes toward pupils with special educational needs and, not surprisingly, this topic featured strongly with seven papers focussed explicitly on teachers' attitudes to including these pupils in mainstream schools. Some of these reported on teachers' attitudes in a particular country, while other addressed specific topics such as teachers' willingness to adapt their teaching approaches. Other papers covered the attitudes of student teachers toward inclusion (three papers), head teachers (two) and educational psychologists (one).

Attitudes toward pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and their impact on school were the subject of four papers. These covered the topic of inclusion of course but had a broader reference. Two papers addressed issues relating to teacher stress and burnout.

## **2.3. Special education policy**

A considerable number of papers dealt with policy at one level or another. Thus, there were seven papers describing special educational provision at national or supra-national (central and eastern European) levels; these necessarily entailed some account of policy, albeit generally of a descriptive kind. A further set of papers dealt with particular policies in areas such as the role and deployment of support teachers, teacher education, inclusion in higher education and inter-agency collaboration.

Some 20 papers, however, were concerned with policy as their sole or principal focus. Approximately one third of these were in a single special issue (13.1) on international perspectives on special education reform. This offered a global perspective with papers covering developments in seven countries across four continents and presenting a diversity of experiences and voices on special education reform movements.

Other papers sought to problematise special education and inclusion, introducing perspectives from sociology, political analysis and legislation. These attempted to locate special educational provision in broad policy contexts – schooling for all, diversity and cultural difference, social justice, citizenship and democracy. A number of papers focussed explicitly on the policy process itself, with particular reference to policy formulation in special education, while others reported on aspects of policy implementation.

## **2.4. Social and emotional development**

A total of 17 papers were concerned with different aspects of children's social and emotional development. (Needless to say, there was a certain amount of overlap between papers on social and emotional development and papers dealing with attitudes.) These focussed on topics such as self-concept, social competence, friendship and loneliness. Many of these sought to document the social position of particular groups such as children with learning difficulties or Down syndrome. In some

cases, the aim was to increase understanding of the social marginalisation of certain groups of children and to evaluate the effects of interventions designed to improve self-concept and other aspects of social development. One paper reported on siblings' understanding of the social implications of learning disabilities.

A part-special issue (22.1) presented a set of papers on the social position of pupils with special needs in regular education. This drew on research conducted in a co-ordinated way across three countries (Germany, the Netherlands and Norway). Sociometric techniques were used to describe the social position of pupils with special needs. This enabled comparisons to be made between pupils in different situations and with different disabling conditions. It may be noted that the overall picture reported regarding the social position of pupils with special needs is negative and somewhat concerning.

## **2.5. Early years provision**

As might be expected, there was some overlap between papers on parents and the family and papers on early years provision. A total of 13 papers addressed different aspects of early development, education and provision. These were mainly on particular aspects of provision or parents' views on it, generally based on survey material (5 papers), and evaluations of interventions such as a social skills programme or a mathematical thinking programme for preschool children (3 papers). Two papers reported on detailed studies of aspects of development, and a further two presented overviews on the state of knowledge about early intervention and identification of children with ADHD and educational interventions for children with cerebral palsy respectively. One paper was concerned with the development of a checklist for assessing those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. It is worth noting that a predominant theme was emotional and behavioural difficulties, accounting for no fewer than five papers.

## **2.6. Language development**

Language development was the subject of 13 papers. There were principally concerned with either pupil characteristics or interventions to promote language development. The former set of papers ranged from morphological markers in French in relation to learner difficulty to the physiological aetiology of dyslexia, and from the reading and writing abilities of upper secondary students in Sweden to the verbal skills of Greek students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The latter reported on a range of interventions designed to improve particular aspects of language – computers, parental support, alternative and augmentative communication, specific musical education – and presented evaluation data in respect of them. A further paper reported on a pilot study to develop tasks for identifying Finnish high-school students with dyslexia, and a number dealt with language development and provision in more general ways.

While these papers covered a diverse and stimulating set of topics, their number and the lack of interconnections between them are disappointing. Language is central to education for all students, especially for those who have difficulty in learning, and one would have hoped for a stronger contribution to the body of knowledge in this area.

TABLE 2. OTHER TOPICS COVERED IN SIX OR MORE PAPERS

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Number of papers</i>
Assessment	9
Mathematics	9
Support teachers	9
Adolescence	8
ICT	8

## 2.7. Assessment

Many of the papers published in the Journal drew on existing instruments to measure variables of interest in the underlying study. These included observation schedules, sociometric measures and achievement tests, with minor adjustments being made to an instrument if the study design or the nature of the population required it. In all these cases the primary focus of the study was on the variables or the phenomena being studied, as opposed to the measurement process or the instruments being used.

In nine papers, however, the primary focus was on the assessment process itself. Four papers reported on studies designed to examine the psychometric characteristics, most often validity, of existing instruments and/or seek to validate their use on new populations. These covered early developmental progress, dyslexia, attention, perceived competence and social acceptance. Three papers reported on the development of new instruments: a checklist addressing developmental difficulties; a screening instrument to identify special educational needs at the beginning of primary schooling; and a set of tasks to identify dyslexia in high school. Two papers reported on the value and validity of baseline assessment and parental views on statutory assessment respectively.

## 2.8. Mathematics

The curriculum area (other than language) receiving most coverage was mathematics, with nine papers. (Remarkably, six of these were written wholly or partly by Dutch researchers.) Most of these reported on the effects of interventions designed to improve learning in respect of basic arithmetical operations – counting, adding and subtracting. Three of the studies reported detailed comparisons between students at different levels of mathematical achievement, and two were based on kindergarten samples.

These papers are noteworthy on two counts. While they are disparate, they help to build up our understanding of mathematical learning in pupils with special educational needs. This is a relatively neglected area, and anything that adds to knowledge in it is to be welcomed. Secondly, the focus on specifying instructional strategies clearly and evaluating them in practical use has produced a good deal of valuable information for classroom use.

## 2.9. Support teachers

The role of the support teacher has developed a good deal in recent years. This topic was addressed in nine papers, with five of them in a part-special issue (16.2). The latter presented data and reviewed practice in England, the Netherlands and Spain as well as Australia. Four other papers gave an account of developments regarding support teachers in Cyprus, England, Germany and Northern Ireland. These papers were primarily descriptive in nature, outlining the range of tasks carried out by

support teachers in particular countries and highlighting the changes that have taken place in them. Some also addressed training, school management and efficacy issues.

### 2.10. Adolescence

A small number of papers, almost all of them from Scandinavia, dealt with issues to do with older students and young adults. There were eight in total. Several covered school transition and school dropout. Two were concerned with language competence, and one reported on a study that used an electronic self-advocacy programme to promote competence among adolescents with learning disabilities. One reported on the predictors of economic independence for adolescents in Norway. A further reported on curricula and teaching approaches in adult training centres in Greece.

### 2.11. Information and communication technology

Given the large claims made for information and communication technology in respect of educational transformation, it is disappointing that this topic accounted for so few papers. There were a total of eight, with only four of them concerned with improving teaching and learning. These dealt, respectively, with electronic simulation for students with hearing impairments, support for reading and spelling, the development of personal competence and collaborative working between special schools. Three papers reported on the use of ICT in teacher education, and one examined video technology as a research tool.

## 3. RESEARCH APPROACHES

As is clear from Table 3, the papers published in the Journal drew on a wide range of research approaches. (Since many of the underlying studies used more than one research method, the total in the table is more than the number of articles published.) While the great majority were empirically based, a sizeable number were theoretical pieces of one kind or another.

TABLE 3. RESEARCH APPROACHES

<i>Research approach</i>	<i>Number of papers</i>
Quantitative	92
Qualitative	62
Comparative	40
Theoretical	25
Descriptive	24
Instrument development	11
Longitudinal	10
Review	7
Conducting research	4
Discourse analysis	2
Multilevel modelling	1

Almost half of the papers were based on quantitative data, principally based on questionnaires but also on tests and other instruments. These varied greatly in scale, from large national samples (relatively few) to small, opportunity samples. Qualitative data were used in just over a quarter of papers. These were based principally on interviews and, to a lesser extent, observations. Many studies of course used both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

About one fifth of papers (40) reported comparative data. These entailed experimental designs with control and comparison groups for the most part, with a few more loosely defined evaluations of programmes or interventions.

The sizeable number of papers (23) under the theoretical heading is noteworthy. These ranged from philosophical analyses of the concepts of inclusion and special needs and scrutiny of prevailing discourses on learning difficulties, to the construction of theoretical frameworks for parent partnership or inter-agency collaboration.

A further set of papers (24) were largely descriptive, though in some cases with a degree of analysis that makes for overlap with the previous group. Typically, these provided descriptions of special educational provision at national level (14 in all), but they also covered specific aspects of provision such as nurture groups and support arrangements.

Eleven papers were based on the use of psychometric techniques to develop or modify tests or other instruments. Ten papers had a longitudinal element. Seven papers presented reviews on topics ranging from teacher attitudes and student self-concepts to trends in educational placements for children with Down syndrome.

Four papers were concerned with conducting research into special education. Two were based on discourse analysis, and just one on multilevel modelling. This latter is in line with the relatively simple statistical analyses employed in the papers as a whole.

#### 4. TYPE OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEED

The majority of papers published referred to special educational needs as a whole or implied a fairly general concept of learning difficulties. Just over a quarter of the papers referred to a specific sub-population, as set out in Table 4. The preponderance of papers on emotional and behavioural difficulties, including autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, is notable, as is the paucity of research on mental illness with just one paper. American readers will note the absence of learning disabilities as a key category, reflecting its limited currency in European special education discourse. It is necessary to refrain from reading too much into these figures since there are a number of disability-specific journals, covering hearing and vision impairment and speech and language difficulties, for instance, and these provide an outlet for papers concerned with these special needs.

TABLE 4. DISTRIBUTION OF PAPERS BY SPECIAL NEED

<i>Special need</i>	<i>Number of papers</i>
Emotional/behavioural difficulties	20
Physical/motor difficulties	9
Hearing impairment	7
Dyslexia	6
Severe learning difficulties	6
Down syndrome	5
Visual impairment	3
Mental illness	1
Learning disability	1

## 5. COUNTRY DISTRIBUTION

While the papers published came from across Europe, they did not do so evenly. The United Kingdom with 65 papers accounted for nearly one third of the total. If other northwest European countries are added in, that proportion goes up to nearly two thirds. The relative underperformance of France and Germany is notable. The conventional explanation given for this pattern is the dominance of the English language and the consequent difficulty that many scholars have in preparing manuscripts for publication in an English-language journal. While there may well be some truth in this, it is not the whole story. For more than half of its life the Journal accepted papers for publication in French and German (with reviewing done in the original language, so no translation was necessary) as well as English. Very few authors availed themselves of that possibility, however, preferring to secure publication in English if possible. It is worth noting too that academics in the countries at the top of the list –UK, Norway, Netherlands, Israel– are under considerable pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals.

TABLE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF PAPERS BY COUNTRY

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of papers</i>
UK	65
Norway	23
Netherlands	20
Israel	17
Sweden	16
Greece	15
Cyprus	10
Finland	6
Spain	6

European countries with fewer than five papers were Ireland (4), Denmark, France, Portugal and Turkey (3 each), Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary and Italy (2), Albania, Lithuania, Serbia and Switzerland (1).

## 6. DISCUSSION

Special education research in Europe, as represented by papers published in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, covers a very broad set of topics. Herein lie strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are most evident in topics like teacher attitudes and pupils' social and emotional development where, not only have there been many papers published, but these have built on each other and have tended to create a coherent body of knowledge. The diversity of education systems in Europe means that findings from one setting are not necessarily directly applicable to a different setting, and a good deal of replication is needed to establish the broader validity of findings. By the same token, this multiplicity of contexts provides the opportunity to test findings in a comprehensive way and establish robust knowledge.

The diversity of topics covered constitutes a challenge. It is of course good that researchers are studying many different facets of the special needs experience, but it must be acknowledged that many topics are represented by one or two, relatively small-scale, studies, and the contribution to the body of knowledge is modest. Given the limited capacity there seems to be for conducting high-quality research in special education, it has to be asked whether such a cottage industry approach is the most productive way of advancing knowledge in our field. In a number of countries, such as England, Italy



and Norway, steps are already being taken to generate a critical mass of research effort in certain areas by identifying key research priorities and directing research funding accordingly. It is likely that this concentration of effort – which is common in other research areas such as medicine, transport, and information and communication technology – will produce greater benefits in terms of knowledge advance.

A disappointing feature of these findings is the set of topics that commanded little or no research. Teacher education, creativity and the arts, and inter-agency working are key topics in developing vibrant special education provision, but only a handful of papers dealt with them. Classroom processes and instructional practices were the subject of seven papers but, given the centrality of the classroom in maximising pupil learning, this at about 3% of the papers published seems remarkably few. Likewise, the core topic of language development attracted only seven papers, though it may be that there are more publishing outlets for work in this area.

Special education research in Europe is a dynamic field, with a wide variety of topics being investigated. It is making a valuable contribution to knowledge, both in the general case and with reference to particular countries. Some of this knowledge is very pertinent to policy makers and practitioners. Certain key topics are relatively under-researched and, for the future, it would be advantageous if these could be given greater attention. It is likely too that a concentration of research effort and resources would benefit the field.